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THE NEW PARENTS' ASSISTANT

BY STEPHEN PAGET, F.R.C.S.

I

A LITTLE BRIEF AUTHORITY

ALL of us know what it is to have to keep up appearances: how it ages man and wife, and cuts into the mutual society, help, and comfort that the one ought to have of the other. It is a most obstinate skeleton, hiding in every cupboard, present at every feast. Our motives to friendship, our choice of a neighborhood, our enjoyment of holidays—all of them are perverted from their proper lines. There are growing-pains and there are labor pains; but the pains which we take to keep up appearances bring nothing much either to growth or to birth. Yet they are so strong, these pains, that if they could be turned to mechanical force they would suffice to move the Admiralty Arch out of London. It is true that the keeping up of appearances accustoms us to endurance and alertness: it gives us ingenuity; but we are longing, all the time, for some reduction of armaments between those two great friendly powers, the neighbors and ourselves. We desire not more Dreadnoughts, but an Ark: a quiet family Ark, with six bedrooms, dressing-room, and good bathroom, moderate rent, and a lease terminable with the emergence of Ararat. And, I think, there is some evidence that appearances are becoming less urgent, less compulsory. The raven came back; the dove came back twice, and is gone again; not a sign of the glint of her wings; and the sky promises fair. We are beginning to be less afraid of what people will say: we venture to drop this or that conventional habit, and nobody is offended: we plan our leisure on unexplored ways, and have no fear that we are trespassing. Any old Londoner can recall the time when lives as fine as ours, and finer, were subject to a more strict rule of appearances than that which is laid on us.

But my theme is the keeping up of appearances, not in society, but at home. Society can look after itself; but home—

There, where I have garnered up my heart,
Where either I must live, or bear no life—

we must not leave home to look after itself. If we would play the fool, let us do it in society; which will not mind if we do, but will just open its mouth and swallow up little Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. Let us not play the fool in our own house; for the children will mind if we do; and they notice everything. The disregard of social appearances may be justified: the disregard of domestic appearances is a more serious offense.

For the keeping up of appearances before the children, we must take into account, first, their opinion of our conduct in their presence. Next, their insight into our dealings with the servants—on whose side, mostly, they are; and that, in many cases, with justice. Next, their verdict on the books we read, the plays we admire, the level of our talk, and the range of our Sundays. Last, their sharp sense, when either of us is cross with the other. It was over a dead child's grave, in the poem, that "we kissed again with tears": it is dreadful to "fall out, my wife and I," if the living children hear us. Nothing could be worse for them. And I consign to perdition, along with tiffs—a properly ugly word—all snaps and snarls, such as "Don't tell me what your mother said," and "Well, you know what your father is." In these pungent homes, the children, up-stairs, make the golliwog and the teddy-bear fall out, they know not why, and kiss again with tears, at the expense of the Fifth Commandment.

It follows that the children like to see us clean and neat, and of blameless manners at the table, noiseless over our food, and careful not to spill. That we must show sympathy and courtesy to the servants, lest the children should apologize to them for us, saying that we did not really mean it, and they hope it will not happen again. Then we set their teeth on edge if we eat sour grapes, calling them our taste. That they feel our jarring voices as we feel the east wind, or the smell from Crosse and Blackwells on a raspberry-vinegar day. All these abandonments of appearances, they are quick to note and to censure; or, what is worse, to imitate.

Like a moth round a lamp—and I wish that some man or

woman of science would tell me why moths fly at lights—I have been circling round the subject which attracted me. Of all domestic appearances, we most jealously guard the appearance of our authority. We claim authority over our children: we fear to lose it: we call on them to recognize it. Yet, in that Parent's Catechism which will some day be written, there is the question, "My good parent, what meanest thou by this word?" And the answer is difficult.

But the difficulty, mostly, is of our own making: we have not given thought to the meaning of the word. We have contented ourselves with a vague notion that our parental authority is a natural product; that we get it, ready-made, by merely having children; that we possess it, as we possess bodily organs and worldly goods; that our power over the children is founded and built on the bare fact that here the children are, just as a man's digestive power is founded and built on the bare fact that here his insides are. And this notion of our authority as a natural product, developed in all of us alike, is not only vague, but downright false. It appeals to Nature: therefore, unto Nature it shall go, and hear what she has to say to it.

The further I trace back, in Nature, the power of parents over their children, the less I like what she tells me. For I find the whole business tainted with savagery—"Oh Jephthah, Judge of Israel, what a daughter hadst thou"—I trace it back to the power of brutes over their young, and to worse than that. At the end of the track of my thoughts, if they can be called thoughts, I see Moloch, Juggernaut, Chronos devouring Zeus, and cats devouring their kittens. So much for the origins or development of parental authority in Nature. But why should we be scared by the origins of ourselves? For we are not origins, but results. The origins all left off before we began; they had to, or we never could have begun. As Mr. Balfour says of the origins of music, in that magnificent second chapter of *The Foundations of Belief*—"How does the fact that our ancestors liked the tom-tom account for our liking the Ninth Symphony?" If my ancestors—I take Mr. Balfour's word for it—did like the tom-tom, I am not surprised that they had to come to an end before I could begin to begin. So it is with all origins: the more we inquire of them, the less we admire them: it is not origins that explain results, it is results that explain origins. Let us limit our inquiry to here and now.

What do we believe, touching our authority over the children, really believe, in our hearts, you and I, my dear? What do we really believe, when we sit together of an evening, and think it over, when the children are asleep? Take what happened only to-day. Boanerges—he is named after his godfather, not me—was extremely difficult, all to-day; we had to be very determined with him: we had to assert our authority. We pulled that cracker, and the noise of it silenced him; and we are left, man and wife, each with one end of a spent cracker. Was it, or was it not, the best way to manage him?

Surely it was, with a child so young as that. But they soon outgrow and resent all such explosive displays, and are stimulated to resistance by our efforts to be irresistible: for they detect in us, or imagine that they detect, ill-judged and intemperate and theatrical behavior. The older they are, the more careful we must be to avoid a masterful high-handed course of action, with scenes, and what are called *strong curtains*. We do them wrong, being so majestic, to offer them the show of violence. Such methods, long ago, kept the Fairchild Family straighter than straight; but the families of this generation are made of other stuff. Indeed, as things are now, Mr. Fairchild might find himself watched by the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. His methods remind me of the story of the Siege of Jericho: how the insistent procession, ultimate and fearsome, bringing the Irresistible along with it, went round and round, till the walls themselves could not stand any more. No wise parent now would thus besiege his children, nor would they thus be captured: they would hardly trouble to look over the edge of their walls; they would merely say, "Oh, of course; Father, as usual." Or they would come forth out of the city, with hosts of arguments, and give battle, and their parents be defeated, in the very presence of the Irresistible.

Against the risk of such disaster, each of us ought to know what right we have to our rights, what authority for our authority. We get no help here from Nature. The primal origins of our authority are hopelessly disreputable; and the nearer past has nothing to tell us, save that everything is always changing. From generation to generation the standard is shifted, the rule is modified. Again and again the sum has been done, and the answer each time has come different. *Ivis custodiet custodes*. Take a dozen

homes, to-day: parental authority is enforced in one, disdained in another. The modern stage, mostly, displays the authoritative parent as a hard-willed fool: Sir Anthony Absolute enslaved to chapel-going, old Capulet run to seed, and Lear, no longer tragic, refusing to his daughter not a kingdom, but a latch-key. Only, Heaven be praised, there was *Milestones*: it had insight, it had distinction. It will need a new act, of course, every thirty years; and I know some good critics who, at the fall of the curtain, planned one, then and there, in a restaurant over the way. Still, to my thinking, the play ends well where it ends now, with the death of old Authority, after a wearisome period of slowly failing strength. Nothing is here for tears: death came so quietly, at the last, hand in hand with honor and with love. *Le Roi est mort*. But the children, none the less, are in need of us. For they are fond of loyalty, they fear and hate anarchy. They desire a king, some sort of a king: they are waiting outside the darkened palace to cry *Vive le Roi*: and we must not keep them waiting. Somebody must be at the head of their affairs, if it be only to earn the money and have charge of the household. And, after all, there is nobody, my dear, but you and I. Not even the most emancipated child can suggest an alternative scheme. We have no power to lay down the cares of state; parental authority may be a thing of the past, but parents are not. It is impossible to doubt that you and I are still expected, if not to govern, yet to reign. Come, your hand; strike up, trumpets and drums; let us at once assume our thrones:—

Here you see the monarch sit,
With his consort opposite—

For we ought always to try to do what the children want, so long as it is nothing which can do them any real harm.

But we must adapt ourselves, carefully, to the new order. We are king and queen under this proviso, that we make no unconstitutional use of our royal supremacy, consult our advisers, and commit no tyrannical act. Amen, so be it. Now let us examine, with purged vision, the purpose and the workings of parental authority, new style. But please let us mind our own business, and leave the neighbors out of the question; for there is plenty to learn in *this toy kingdom of ours*, without going outside. Also, let us forget those

occasions when your authority and mine have been at variance:—

And while Papa said "Pooh, she may,"
Mama said, "No, she sha'n't."

For it is facts that we want, not casuistry. And I say that parental authority is not a free or unconditional grant or subsidy from Heaven. We get it not all at once, but by instalments; we are paid, not for having children, but for looking after them; there is no covenant between Heaven and us, only a general understanding that we may hope to receive what we have earned, but must earn something before we receive anything.

Mark how we set to work; observe the initial ways of a mother with a baby. There are two words—"Naughty Baby"—which mothers of large families may well be tired of saying. These are the first words of parental authority; and all our later exercises of authority are nothing more than variations on this theme. The earliest use of these words is to teach the baby to keep itself clean; that is, when it is about six months old, but not before. His mother's authority over Boanerges, therefore, was born about six months after him. My authority drew its first breath a few weeks later, on the day when he was trying to swallow my watch. Nothing of authority could pass from us to him till he was able, more or less, to attend to the sound of us. For the first few months we were impersonal to him, for he was impermeable to us; we were just like the two sides of his cot, let up to keep him in. Till he was old enough to be naughty, we had no authority over him. She nursed him; I looked at him. So long as he was too young for me to say "Naughty Baby" to him, I was powerless.

Slowly, year by year, with pleasure and pain, success and failure, pride and shame, comes that good understanding between parents and children which we call our authority. It is innumerable acts of parental care and filial acceptance; and so quick is the sequence of them that we get the impression or sense of continuity, as with a film at a picture-palace. We see our authority not as a series, but as a fixture; we talk of it as if it were always there, like a policeman at Oxford Circus. It is just a name for the children trying to be obedient to us and us trying to be wise with them. We cannot lock it up, as if it were the check-book; nor send it to the Bank, during our holiday, as if it were the silver tea-set; nor

flourish it all of a sudden, as if it were the poker, and the children were a noise in the basement. It is nothing that we have, it is only what we are. It is ourselves feeling our way to the children, and they to us.

Truly, here is a kingdom to be proud of. What can be better for us than to try to be good? What more suitable gift could Heaven devise for us parents? But we must be always deserving it, or it will stop coming. It is not handed to us, once and for all, across Heaven's counter, along with a baby, like a sugar-basin with a pound of tea. *Mancipio nulli datur, omnibus usu*. As with all other gifts, so with this gift of authority, the only hold that we have on it is the use that we make of it. That is the rule under which we get our gifts; and quite right, too.

It follows that we are at any rate as safe on our thrones as we are anywhere else. We must play no fantastic tricks before high Heaven. None the less, we are king and queen *Dei gratiâ*; that is, on this divine condition that we keep on trying to do the best thing for the children. So long as we are thus employed, we are in authority over them.

I wrote *Dei gratiâ*; and it occurred to me to turn out the coins which were in my pocket, that I might assure myself of the accompanying words, *Defensor Fidei*. Penny, sixpence, shilling, florin—they all implied to me that they who reign by the Grace of God are thereby bound to be Defenders of the Faith. I put the four coins on the mantelpiece, in a row, and looked hard at them; but I could not stare them out of countenance, nor make them change their opinion. They were unanimously agreed that parents, to be deserving of authority, ought to defend the faith of their children. This resolution was sent up to me from the mantelpiece; and it shall receive my serious consideration.

(To be Continued)

STEPHEN PAGET.